

The Mediating Role of Psychosocial Benefits in The Satisfaction Formation Process

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Abstract

In this paper we investigate the mediating role of psychosocial benefits in the customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction formation process. Most research on this subject deals with the causality direction of psychosocial benefits and satisfaction, sometimes preceded by an overall functional benefit construct. We focus on the relationships of *specific* functional benefits and psychosocial benefits within a customer satisfaction framework. Knowledge of which functional benefit can control which psychosocial benefit directly enables the management of customer satisfaction and indirectly purchase intention. Using Partial Least Squares, we find interesting relationships in the restaurant business.

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1. Introduction

The relationships between perceived service quality, customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and (re)purchase intention is attracting much attention in the service marketing literature nowadays (Oliver, 1993; Taylor and Baker, 1994; Rust and Oliver, 1994). According to Rust and Oliver (1994, p. 14) '... the most intriguing issue facing service marketers today is the interplay between quality, satisfaction, and value... Research is needed on the causal mechanism that relates these three constructs.' It appears that perceived service quality is thought to be an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1993) and that customer satisfaction is an antecedent of (re) purchase intentions (e.g. Bitner, 1990). Consumers experiencing high quality will probably be more satisfied, whereas consumers that are satisfied with a service will probably purchase the service again. Within this hierarchy, customer satisfaction seems to play a crucial and primary role connecting current and future behavior.

Most of the early research on customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction formation processes basically focuses on *functional benefits* (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982; Tse and Wilton, 1988). Functional benefits are based on product knowledge and are often visible and controllable for the marketing researcher and practitioner. Functional benefits can be operationalized as quality dimensions or attributes (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982; Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml, 1991). More recently, researchers make a distinction between functional benefits and psychosocial benefits (Mano and Oliver, 1994; Oliver, 1993; Rust and Oliver, 1994, Price, Arnould and Tierney, 1995). Whereas functional benefits are product-based, *psychosocial benefits* are consumer-based. Distinguishing between functional and psychosocial benefits seems to improve the explanation and prediction of the customer satisfaction formation. The objective of these researchers has been primarily the confirmation of some hierarchy-of-effect hypothesis (Oliver, 1993; Liljander and Strandvick, 1995; Koelemeijer et. al, 1995). Westbrook (1987) for example showed that positive affect and negative affect are distinct constructs and are both significantly related to satisfaction in the expected direction. In addition, Oliver (1993) unraveled these aggregated constructs and found significant effects of separate dimensions of positive (interest and joy) and negative affect on satisfaction. He found that (dis)satisfaction with the functional benefits has both a direct and indirect effect on overall satisfaction. Price et al. (1995) found that within extended, affective, and intimate service encounters (river rafting) provider performance strongly affects positive affect, but is not related to

negative affect. Provider performance in this study is based on authentic understanding and extras that may be treated as functional benefits.

To summarize these and other findings one may conclude that there is a relationship between functional benefits and psychosocial benefits and that both constructs are related to customer satisfaction. One of the deficiencies however is that in most of this research, perhaps with the exception of Oliver (1993), the functional benefits are related to an aggregate measure and/or that this aggregated functional benefit measure is related to the psychosocial benefits. That is, these works did not consider the sources of affective responses. The idea is that positive and negative affect should be explicitly modeled as emerging from consumer reactions to product feature performance, i.e. functional benefits. More specified knowledge on which functional benefits influence which psychosocial benefits seems needed in order to manage customer satisfaction and purchase intention more properly. As our objective is to relate separate functional benefits to psychosocial benefits within a customer satisfaction framework we will first review the literature on these issues. Next, the methodology and empirical findings are reported.

2. Literature review

Literature shows that consumers distinguish a limited set of functional benefits in evaluating services. The determinant benefits are those that are important to consumers and are variable across alternatives. Following the multi-attribute paradigm, the functional benefits constitute perceived service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985) which is the consumer's judgment of a product's overall excellence or superiority. Therefore, to improve marketing analysis one must identify the salient benefits that constitute overall perceived quality. Sets of functional benefits found in research include (1) framework of time, including availability, responsiveness, waiting time, process time, and repeatability; (2) fault freeness, such as the correctness of information, control procedures, and physical items specified; (3) flexibility that captures benefits such as coping with mistakes and customizing the service; (4) style, including the personnel's attitude and the service ambiance; (5) steering, such as clarity, and service consistency; and (6) safety, including attributes as honesty of information, security, and confidentiality (e.g. Parasuraman et al., 1985; Armistead, 1989).

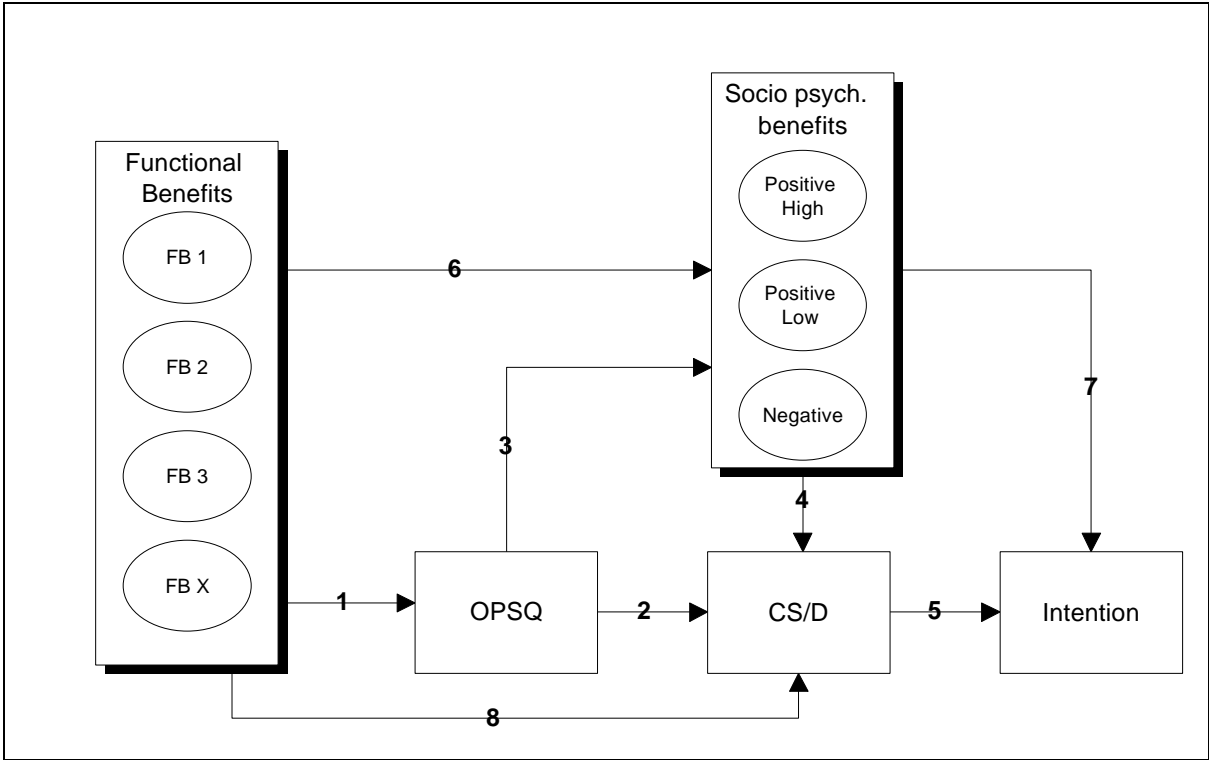
Psychosocial benefits concern the affective states of the consumer caused by consuming the product or service. Especially in services these benefits are interesting as in some services like health spas and funeral services, the consumer is motivated by the expected psychosocial benefits offered by the service (Bagozzi, Baumgartner and Pieters, 1995). In other services such as plastic surgery and financial advising, the consumer might be motivated by the expected functional benefits, but the affective or psychosocial content is still an important part of interaction and satisfaction (Price et al., 1995).

Peter and Olson (1993) make a distinction between four different types of affective reactions ordered from high through low activation: emotions, specific feelings, moods and evaluation. In the literature, emotions are often treated as indicators of psychosocial benefits (e.g. Mano and Oliver, 1994).

The Mehrabian and Russel's (1974) category of emotions represents three measures; pleasure, arousal, and dominance. Izard (1977) and Plutchik (1980) develop more extensive lists of emotions. Plutchik's (1980) research for example, revealed eight basic emotions containing fear, anger, joy, sadness, disgust, acceptance, anticipation, and surprise. A distinction often found in emotion studies is between positive and negative emotions (e.g. Mano and Oliver, 1994). If a product or service fails to live up to the customer's needs or expectations, it is thought that s/he will respond with negative emotions. If the product is perceived to be as desired or better, the customer will respond with positive emotions (Oliver, 1993; Oliver and Westbrook, 1993). Sometimes positive emotions are distinguished into low and high arousal emotions (Oliver and Westbrook, 1991; Oliver, 1993).

Satisfaction can be defined as "... the summary psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with the consumer's prior feeling about the consumption experience" (Oliver, 1981 p. 27). Satisfied consumers feel subjectively good (positive) or bad (negative) and therefore a self-evaluation is involved. Customer satisfaction is a trade-off between costs and benefits on a transactional basis (Swan, Trawick and Carroll, 1981), involving both cognitive and functional and affective or psychosocial elements (Rust and Oliver, 1994). Bolton and Drew (1991) show that satisfaction is highly related to (re) purchase intention.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Satisfaction Formation Process



Research shows different approaches to integrating benefits in a customer satisfaction framework. Westbrook (1987) treats functional benefits and psychosocial benefits as independent constructs trying to explain customer satisfaction judgments. More recent studies however show that these antecedents of customer satisfaction are interrelated. Bolton and Drew (1991) model differentiated functional benefits to an overall functional benefit (perceived quality) and relates these to satisfaction. In Oliver's (1993) model functional benefits and psychosocial benefits are related and also have independent effects on satisfaction. Functional benefits are treated here as an aggregated construct whereas psychosocial benefits are differentiated. Price et al. (1995) expands Oliver's approach by including two differentiated functional benefits that are strictly related to an aggregated functional benefit.

We will expand Oliver's model by investigating the direct relationships between differentiated functional benefits and psychosocial benefits. Two models are tested, one without the mediation of an overall functional benefit construct (overall perceived quality) (relations 4,5,6,7 and 8: figure 1), and one including

such a construct (relations 1, 2,3,4,5,6,7 and 8: figure 1). Knowledge of which functional benefit can control which psychosocial benefit directly enables the management of customer satisfaction and indirectly purchase intention. When using an aggregated measure the total effects of functional benefits are constraint and can be misleading.

In the next section we will report a study in which the traditional approaches (Bolton and Drew, 1991; Oliver, 1993; and Price et al., 1995) will be compared to our approach in which interrelationships of differentiated functional with psychosocial benefits are explicitly considered with and without an overall functional benefit construct (overall perceived quality) as a mediator.

3. Method

The proposed conceptual model in Figure 1 is tested within the restaurant business. A questionnaire was used to gather information on the constructs of interest. Four hundred customers visiting 13 different restaurants in a mid-sized city in The Netherlands responded reflecting a 28.4 percent response rate. All constructs were measured with multiple-items (except the dimension of time) that are reflective of the construct in question, to improve the reliability of instruments. Table 1 shows some details of the measures.

The Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach to structural equation models is used to cope with the highly skewed satisfaction data (e.g., Fornell, 1992), the large number of variables, and the relative low number of observations when compared to the number of parameters to be estimated (Fornell and Bookstein, 1982). The main purpose of PLS is to maximize prediction of constructs. This is accomplished by using a series of interdependent multiple regression with fixed-point estimation in order to minimize residual variance in structural equations. In the first estimation step an estimate is obtained for each latent variable as a linear combination of its indicators. In the second step these estimates are treated as directly observed variables and they are re-estimated according to a path- weighting scheme to maximize correlation between constructs (Lohmöller, 1984). The resulting coefficients are interpreted as standardized partial regression coefficients. A large number of variables can be handled and no

assumptions with respect to population distribution and scales of measurement are necessary. Significance of the parameters is assessed using PLS jackknifing (Fornell and Bookstein, 1982). Computation of construct reliability and validity proceeds in the same manner as in ordinary structural equation models (e.g., Fornell and Larcker, 1981). To compare different models predictive relevance is used as no statistical test of model fit is provided.

Table 1: Operationalization of Constructs and Reliability and Validity of Measurement Models

| Constructs | Items and Subdimensions | Alpha ¹ | AVE ² |
|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------|------------------|
| Functional Benefits | Professionalism (5 items) | .88 | .48 |
| | Service Scapes (4 items) | .91 | .59 |
| | Attention (5 items) | .82 | .54 |
| | Reliability (2 items) | .96 | .86 |
| | Food (3 items) | .84 | .51 |
| | Tangibles (3 items) | .86 | .54 |
| | Privacy (3 items) | .85 | .54 |
| | Accessibility (2 items) | .93 | .77 |
| | Time (1 item) | - | 1.00 |
| Overall Perceived Service Quality | Service quality compared to earlier experiences and other providers, total quality compared to earlier experiences, Mark (1-10) | .91 | .61 |
| Positive High Arousal | Surprised, Cheerful, Joyful, Curiosity, Pleasantness | .95 | .66 |
| Positive Low Arousal | Ease, Confidentiality, Calm | .96 | .79 |
| Negative Arousal | Nervous, Irritated, Unpleasant, Worried, Bored | .95 | .68 |
| Satisfaction | Satisfied with visit, Comfortable with visit, Proper choice, Same choice in similar situation | .97 | .80 |
| (Re)purchase Intention | Repeated visit current restaurant, Repeated visit type of restaurant, Positive word-of-mouth, Future visit of restaurants | .68 | .37 |

¹ Coefficient alpha is computed as $\frac{\sum(\text{loadings})^2}{\sum(\text{loadings})^2 + \text{error variance}}$.

² Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is computed as $\frac{\sum(\text{loadings})^2}{\sum(\text{loadings})^2 + \text{error variance}}$.

4. Empirical findings

Using the LVPLS 1.8 program by Lohmöller (1984) we compared the approaches of Bolton and Drew (1991), Oliver (1993), and Price et al. (1995) with our extended approach. All constructs possess high reliabilities and AVE's with averages across constructs of .89 and .62 respectively. Convergent and discriminant validity of constructs is established as indicated by significant parameters in the measurement model and AVE's exceeding explained variance in equations.

The results of the structural part of the model are robust while all paths are significantly different from zero ($p < .001$) and in the expected direction (see Table 2). The hierarchy-of-effect hypothesis is confirmed as indicated by the significant direct relationships between overall perceived service quality (OPSQ) and sociopsychological benefits and satisfaction, and by the indirect relationships of OPSQ and satisfaction mediated by psychosocial benefits.

As expected, satisfaction was predicted better in the Price et al. (1995) model which included sociopsychological benefits ($R^2 = .62$) than in the Bolton and Drew model ($R^2 = .45$). Also, introduction of psychosocial benefits in the model gives a more detailed insight into processes giving rise to satisfaction. Satisfaction is directly influenced by overall perceived service quality ($b = .28$), directly by positive high arousal ($b = .63$), positive low arousal ($b = .60$), negative arousal ($b = -.50$), and indirectly through the OPSQ → Psychosocial Benefits → Satisfaction hierarchy.

Table 2 shows the magnitudes of important paths and predictive relevance across five different models. Whereas the Managerial model excludes OPSQ but includes direct effects of the differentiated functional benefits on psychosocial benefits and satisfaction, the Integrative Model includes both. The Integrative outperforms all other models in terms of predictive relevance, especially the predictive relevance of the psychosocial benefits. The Managerial Model performance slightly worse than Price et al.'s model.

Table 2: Magnitudes of Important Paths and Predictive Relevance Across Different Models

| Paths | Bolton and Oliver (1993) Drew (1991) | Price et al. (1995) | Managerial Model | Integrative Model |
|--|---|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| OPSQ → Positive High Arousal | | .63 | | .45 |
| OPSQ → Positive Low Arousal | | .60 | | .51 |
| OPSQ → Negative Arousal | | -.50 | | -.43 |
| OPSQ → Satisfaction | .67 | .28 | | .28 |
| Positive High Arousal → Satisfaction | | .39 | .38 | .27 |
| Positive Low Arousal → Satisfaction | | .26 | .26 | .20 |
| Negative Arousal → Satisfaction | | -.25 | -.25 | -.20 |
| Positive High Arousal → (Re)purchase Intention | | .13 | .12 | .13 |
| Positive Low Arousal → (Re)purchase Intention | | .13 | .13 | .13 |
| Negative Arousal → (Re)purchase Intention | | -.04 | -.04 | -.04 |
| Satisfaction → (Re)purchase Intention | .69 | .66 | .66 | .66 |
| Overall Perceived Service Quality | .42 | .42 | | .41 |
| Positive High Affect | | .39 | .34 | .46 |
| Positive Low Affect | | .36 | .24 | .39 |
| Negative Affect | | .26 | .20 | .31 |
| Satisfaction | .45 | .58 | .58 | .62 |
| (Re)purchase Intention | .47 | .48 | .48 | .48 |

However, the exact differences in predictive relevance are not as interesting as the differences in importance weights shown in Table 3. The accepted standard of linking functional benefits to OPSQ introduces biased managerial information, as can be seen from the different rank orders of important weights across dependent variables.

Table 3: Importance Weights Relating Functional Benefits to Overall Perceived Service Quality and Psychosocial Benefits

| | <i>Price et al. (1995)</i> | | | | <i>Managerial Model</i> | | | | <i>Integrative Model</i> | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|-------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|--------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| | <i>OPSQ</i> | <i>PHA</i> | <i>PLA</i> | <i>NA</i> | <i>OPSQ</i> | <i>PHA</i> | <i>PLA</i> | <i>NA</i> | <i>OPSQ</i> | <i>PHA</i> | <i>PLA</i> | <i>NA</i> |
| Service Scape | .24 (1) | .40 (1) | .26 (1) | -.26 (1) | .24 (1) | .29 (1) | .13 (2) | -.15 (1) | .24 (1) | .29 (1) | .13 (2) | -.15 (1) |
| Attention | .20 (2) | .17 (2) | .25 (2) | -.26 (1) | .21 (2) | .07 (2) | .14 (1) | -.06 (6) | .21 (2) | .07 (2) | .14 (1) | -.06 (6) |
| Professionalism | .19 (3) | .08 (3) | .03 (7) | -.11 (4) | .16 (3) | .02 (5) | -.05 (4) | -.04 (8) | .16 (3) | .02 (5) | -.05 (4) | -.04 (8) |
| Privacy | .10 (4) | .05 (4) | .03 (6) | .10 (6) | -.09 (4) | .02 (5) | -.01 (8) | -.07 (5) | -.09 (4) | .02 (5) | -.01 (8) | -.07 (5) |
| Tangibles | .04 (9) | .03 (5) | .08 (3) | .04 (8) | -.03 (9) | -.02 (5) | -.07 (3) | .03 (9) | -.03 (9) | -.02 (5) | -.07 (3) | .03 (9) |
| Accessibility | .10 (4) | .03 (6) | .08 (3) | .19 (3) | -.09 (4) | .01 (9) | -.04 (5) | .15 (1) | -.09 (4) | .01 (9) | -.04 (5) | .15 (1) |
| Food | .07 (7) | .02 (7) | .04 (5) | .08 (7) | -.08 (7) | .01 (8) | -.01 (8) | -.11 (3) | -.08 (7) | .01 (8) | -.01 (8) | -.11 (3) |
| Time | .07 (8) | .00 (8) | .00 (9) | .11 (4) | .06 (8) | -.04 (3) | -.02 (6) | -.08 (4) | .06 (8) | -.04 (3) | -.02 (6) | -.08 (4) |
| Reliability | .08 (6) | .00 (8) | .02 (8) | .02 (9) | -.09 (4) | .03 (4) | .02 (6) | -.06 (6) | -.09 (4) | .03 (4) | .02 (6) | -.06 (6) |

¹ Between parentheses are rank numbers indicating most important (rank 1) and least important (rank 9) functional benefits in predicting the dependent variable.

² OPSQ= Overall Perceived Service Quality; PHA= Positive High Affect; PLA= Positive Low Affect; NA= Negative Affect.

For example, effective management of positive high affect requires different functional benefits to be changed than managing positive low affect. Professionalism ranks third in changing positive high affect, whereas it ranks 7 in changing positive low affect.

Table 4 shows the total effects of the functional benefits on satisfaction. These total effects have been computed as the sum of the direct and indirect effects. Not only the effects of functional benefits on the different depending variables differ, but also the total effects of the functional benefits in the Price et al. Model differ from the Managerial model.

Table 4: Total Effects Functional Benefits to Satisfaction

| | <i>Price et al. (1995)</i> | | <i>Managerial Model</i> | | <i>Integrative Model</i> | |
|-----------------|----------------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|
| | <i>Satisfaction</i> | | <i>Satisfaction</i> | | <i>Satisfaction</i> | |
| Service Scape | .13 | (1) | .29 | (1) | .26 | (1) |
| Attention | .11 | (2) | .17 | (2) | .17 | (2) |
| Professionalism | .10 | (3) | .07 | (4) | .11 | (3) |
| Privacy | .05 | (4) | .06 | (5) | .07 | (7) |
| Accessibility | .05 | (5) | .08 | (3) | .09 | (4) |
| Reliability | .04 | (6) | .02 | (9) | .07 | (5) |
| Food | .04 | (7) | .04 | (7) | .07 | (6) |
| Time | .04 | (8) | .03 | (8) | .06 | (8) |
| Tangibles | .02 | (9) | .04 | (6) | .04 | (9) |

¹ Between parentheses are rank numbers indicating most important (rank 1) and least important (rank 9) functional benefits in predicting Satisfaction.

For example Accessibility ranks third in the Managerial model, whereas it ranks fifth in the Price model. The accepted standard of linking functional benefits to OPSQ introduces biased managerial information, as can be seen from the different rank orders of the total effects of the functional benefits on satisfaction.

5. Conclusions and directions for future research

To date, no published studies have focused on the relationships of specific functional benefits and psychosocial benefits within a customer satisfaction framework. Prior research related the functional benefits are to an aggregate measure and, this aggregated functional benefit measure is related to the psychosocial benefits. The purpose of our exploratory study was to examine if the use of an aggregated overall perceived service quality (OPSQ) construct gives biased managerial information.

Overall, the findings provide some support for the exclusion of the OPSQ construct, and focus on the direct effect of the different functional and psychosocial benefits. Positive and negative affect should be

explicitly modeled as emerging from consumer reactions to product feature performance, i.e. functional benefits.

Current study indicates that it is important to track both satisfiers (if you do these, the customer will be more satisfied) and dissatisfiers (if you fail to do these, they will be less satisfied) in the satisfaction formation process. Satisfiers and dissatisfiers seem to be independent. That is, failing to provide a satisfier will not provoke a negative response, and providing more satisfiers does not necessarily compensate for a dissatisfier. By eliminating the dissatisfiers, it is possible to make more customers satisfied while maintaining reasonable margins (Wilson, 1998). Within the satisfaction formation hierarchy, customer satisfaction seems to play a crucial and primary role connecting current and future behavior. It costs five times as much to sell a new customer as it does to make the same sale to an existing customer (Albrecht, Zemke). The real money is in the subsequent sale, and will spend far more than might seem prudent at first glance to buy back a customer's good graces.

For example in the restaurant study, attractive diner-set (Tangibles, a satisfier) will not compensate for long waiting time (dissatisfier). Knowledge of which functional benefit can control which psychosocial benefit directly enables the management of customer satisfaction and indirectly purchase intention.

Our study indicates that more specified knowledge on which functional benefits influence which psychosocial benefits is needed, in order to manage customer satisfaction and purchase intention more properly. The use of an aggregated functional benefit construct gives biased managerial information.

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